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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 002218

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/02/2013

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [YM](#) [DOMESTIC](#) [POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: PROMINENT EXILES RETURNING TO YEMEN

Classified By: Charge D' Affaires Alan G. Misenheimer for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

1. (c) Summary: Prominent Yemeni exiles who left after the 1994 conflict continue to slowly return to Yemen, including most recently Dr. Abdul-Aziz al-Dali, a former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) foreign minister. The 2002 Presidential pardon of 16 separatist Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) leaders, however, has not resulted in the return of any of the "list of 16," including the top leadership. President Saleh publicly repeated his encouragement for exiles to return home just after the April 2003 parliamentary elections, supporting speculation that the measure is intended to provide a counter-balance to tribal, Islamist and military forces on the political landscape. It remains to be seen how prominent a role returnees will play in Yemeni politics. End Summary.

Background

2. (u) Following the foiled secession attempt during the 1994 war, hundreds of Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) military and civilian leaders and their supporters fled Yemen to neighboring Gulf States, Egypt, Syria and the United Kingdom. The ROYG conducted trials in absentia and issued death sentences to 16 senior leaders, led by former ROYG vice-president and YSP secretary general Ali Salem al-Beedh, who had fled to Oman.

3. (u) Since the May 2002 Presidential decree dropping charges against separatist leaders of the "list of 16" and pardoning them, a number of military and civilian leaders and their families have returned to Yemen. While it seems that no one from the list has yet come back, the pardon issued by President Saleh has encouraged other prominent personalities to return. The most prominent leader to return recently is Dr. Abdul-Aziz al-Dali, member of the YSP Central Committee, former PDRY Foreign Minister and post-1990 unity Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. He is the highest-ranking YSP official come back since newly-appointed Presidential Advisor Salem Saleh last year (septel).

Will Any of the "16" Return?

4. (u) It appears that none of the prominent members of the "list of 16" has returned to Yemen, although there are unconfirmed rumors that perhaps one minor military official has come back. Negotiations between President Saleh and some of the most well-known members of the "16" for their return are reportedly ongoing. In a statement to al-Sahwa-net, the on-line newspaper of the Islah party, Dr. al-Dali mentioned that several high-level exiles were considering returning to Yemen soon, including:

-- Haidar Abu-Baker al-Attas, among the "16" and former Prime Minister of the ROYG and former PDRY President of the Supreme People's Council

-- Yassin Saeed Noman, former Speaker of the first post-unity Parliament and former PDRY Prime Minister (Note: He is popular and widely regarded by all political forces. End Note)

-- Mohamed Saeed Abdullah Muhsen, former Minister of what is now called the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and former PDRY Minister of State Security.

Comment: What's in it for Saleh?

5. (c) Before the 1994 conflict, the YSP was seen as a counter-balancing force to the tribal, Islamist and military influences in Yemen. Many observers view the returnee initiative as an attempt to keep influential forces balanced against each other in a political scene where maintaining a power equilibrium is one of President Saleh's primary objectives (along with following the adage keep your friends close but your enemies closer). Some believe Saleh wants to ensure the Republic of Yemen can never be split again into north and south by keeping close tabs on the PDRY's former leaders. His recent appointment of former YSP Assistant

Secretary General Salem Saleh, a 2002 returnee, as one of his

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advisors supports these views (septel). Saleh's repetition of his call to the so-called "list of 16" soon after the April 2003 elections was probably also fueled by such concerns. Despite the overwhelming win by the ruling party majority in the election, the opposition Islamist and tribal Islah party made significant gains in Sanaa, including in the President's constituency. Some observers also believe that the ROYG may be under pressure from the countries harboring the exiles to allow returns, because many of these countries provide financial support to the exiles. End Comment.

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